

## Report

# Qatar and the US: Towards a New Partnership

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Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani and Barack Obama [AP]

## Abstract

This report addresses the political options before the United States (US) in the Middle East in light of the recent visit of the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, to the US. The report aims to shed light on the challenges and the changes that the Arab Spring has imposed on the region for the US and other regional states. A key challenge is the potential failure and the total disintegration of several states in the Arab World and the political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian implications of such a change on the US and its close allies in the region. The turmoil in the Arab World is inviting many new realities and ushering in the potential of shaking the balance of power in the region for years to come. Recently, the Russian Federation has stepped in its efforts to fill the political and military vacuum that the US has created by its benign neglect in countries like Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. This report asks a vital question; can the US impact events on the ground alone? Or does it need to form new partnerships with willing and able countries in the region to avoid the creation of any political vacuum in the Arab World.

## Introduction

The Arab Spring altered many of the orthodox axioms in the Arab world and called to question the old order and its durability to continue to exist along the same shaky parameters of the past. This cloudy picture has been coupled by a desire of an

incremental withdrawal by the US from the region and by its willingness to manage events remotely through selected military operations that neglect the essence and the nature of the tensions in the Middle East. In the last four years, the US demonstrated a lack of empathy and real support for the aspirations of the Arab youth that filled the streets with hope and civility. The Obama Administration has been pursuing a hands-off approach in the Middle East, a policy that drove many countries and movements in the region to near breakdown. The US' irrational policies are forcing few responsible powers and leaders in the Middle East to offer their expertise and help to pull the region from the brink of collapse. The impact of America's neglect and passivity on the region dominated all of the meetings that Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani held in Washington D.C. from 24 to 27 February 2015 in his recent visit to the US. The Emir focused on a clear message: Qatar is ready and can help and is committed to peace and stability in the region and around the world (1).

This report addresses the political opportunities and the challenges that face the US in the Arab world in light of the Arab Spring. A key opportunity is the willingness of states like Qatar to offer their help and cooperation to bring the region back from the brink of collapse. Qatar demonstrated its willingness to play a crucial role in stabilizing the region through the statements that Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani retreated in Washington in his recent visit. To avoid many possible challenges, the US is in dire need to listen to its allies and construct a new vision for the region. The alternative will be chaos, instability, and a change in the balance of power for years to come. The region cannot afford another era of a rigid balance of power similar to that of the Cold War.

### **Qatar's vision for the region**

In all his public speaking engagements in the US, Emir Tamim laid the foundation for a solid partnership with the US and demonstrated the extent to which the state of Qatar can play a critical and a positive role in calming the region and in contributing to peace and stability in the Arab world at large. Qatar shares with the US a vision of stability and peace; however, Qatar is advocating a different tactic for dealing with these challenges, and offering itself to assist in solving them hand in hand with the US and all peace loving countries in the world (2). Qatari foreign policy is bound by article VII of its constitution. The article stipulates the following: encouraging peaceful resolutions of international disputes, supporting people's rights to self-determination, cooperation with peace-loving nations, and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states (3).

These tenets allow Qatar a wide margin of manoeuvrability and give it the credibility needed to act as an independent but concerned member of the international community.

Qatar's transformative foreign policy is similar to that of Norway. For instance, Norway keeps an open relations with Hamas and keeps funding many humanitarian projects in the Gaza Strip unabated by the many criticism it receives from the US or Israel. In addition, Norway was the first country to send its envoys to the Gaza Strip in support of the newly formed unity government in 2007. Norway did that against the will of the US and without fully coordinating its steps with the Europeans (4). Both countries garner their credibility to initiate such moves due to their insists on separating the humanitarian from the political, thus the two countries maintain open relations with many of the concerned parties and allow both sides to present their cases equally. This criterion grants both countries the necessary mechanism to move forward with mammoth diplomatic projects successfully and elegantly. The open channels that Norway and Qatar keep with many actors around the world serve as crucial mediums for communication and assist in bridging the gaps between and among all concerned parties in any conflict zone. Therefore, Qatar can provide the US and many other powers with the necessary ingredients to launch constructive initiatives to the most gruelling issues in the region and around the world.

The Qatari vision for a more stable Middle East was made public in an opinion piece in the New York Times (Qatar's Message to Obama) (5), in which the Qatari leadership emphasized on the following principles: justice, security, equality and restoring hope for all. The Emir's vision promised a better option than the one solution fits all approach that the US has been championing for the last few decades in a region so diverse and longing for dialog and understanding. Qatar's proposal of social justice and hope injects new life in the many promises that President Barak Obama made to the region in the several speeches he gave in Istanbul, Cairo, and the State Department. Emir Tamim conveyed his message and vision to his counterpart and all the civil society leaders that he met with very clearly and unambiguously. The Qatari message of justice and peace for all offers the US with a different path and proposes an alternative to all the old and unsuccessful policies of the US in the region. Qatar's emphasis on solving the Palestinian-Israel conflict is a sound advice and it should be given a serious consideration by the Obama Administration. According to many observes in the region, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict serves as the biggest recruiter for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, (ISIS) (6). The Qatari leadership shares that view and argues that it is conducive to many of the acts of violence that take place in the region and beyond.

Qatar's proposal of partnership with the US can be established and does not require an extra effort on either side. Qatar has the infrastructure necessary of an economic, cultural, military, and political institution that can serve that goal fully and can translate that vision fully.

## **Qatar-US economic and trade relations**

The economic relations between the two countries have been steadily rising for the last three decades. US exports to Qatar reached US \$5.3 billion in 2014 (7). Despite the fact that most of Qatar's trade exchanges are primarily with Europe and Japan, multinational US companies such as ExxonMobil, Occidental Petroleum and Pennzoil are active in the development of the oil and gas industry in Qatar, and ExxonMobil is cooperating with a branch of Qatar Petroleum to build a large-scale methane station, known as the "Golden Pass", on the Texas coast.

In addition, the American Chamber of Commerce in Qatar (AmCham Qatar) was launched in Doha during February 2010, as the first legally established foreign Chamber of Commerce in the country. It is registered as a private institution for public benefit. In other words, it is a non-profit, non-governmental and non-political organisation dedicated to fostering mutual cooperation and understanding between Qatar and the US in the trade, commerce and investment fields.

Furthermore, Qatar hosts leading American academic institutions. Six American universities have branches in Qatar. These universities aim at building bridges of dialogue, and trust between the two cultures and aspire to train a new generation of Arab and Western elites to encourage better understanding and create a group of leaders with a shared vision towards the future. The academic city seeks to eventually narrow economic, cultural, and intellectual gaps and find a common universal language for all. These economic, cultural, and academic infrastructures pave the way for strong bonding between the two countries and allow the two sides to consolidate their relations and plan for moving forward to the next level of mutual respect and the formation of a true strategic partnership.

## **Qatar and the US: mutual respect**

During this latest visits, Qatar offered to be of great assistance to the US on many regional and global issues. Qatar has garnered immense experience, credibility, skills, and the ability to engage with many of the parties on equal footing and assist the adversaries to arrive at a comprehensive solution that reflects the domestic cohesion of the indigenous actors rather than Qatar itself. The leadership in Qatar has excelled in this art and invested a great deal of resources in making it happen. In the last two decades, Qatar has served as a mediator to the Lebanese, Libyans, Palestinians, Sudanese, and Yemenis. In addition, Qatari diplomats are very well connected and familiar with many of the key players in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq and Syria, and conflict zones where the US needs a great deal of help and sound advice. For instance, Qatar

hosts the leadership of Hamas, opened a liaison office for the Taliban, handed the Syrian embassy and its diplomatic protocols to the Syrian Coalition (E'tilaf), and opened its doors to Dr. Tarek al-Hashemi, a descendant of one of the most influential families in Iraq, and a dominant leader and key power broker among the Sunnis in Iraq.

Therefore, the US can benefit enormously from Qatar's soft power, and should consider the offer of partnership from its Emir very seriously. The Obama administration can benefit a great deal from Qatar's experience and knowledge and vast array of resources in conflict resolution and diplomatic relations. However, the Qatari leadership is not asking for a free ride in its relationship with the US. Emir Tamim made his views crystal clear when he stated the following, " I will be honest with you, we should not only be depending on America.[We] Arab countries, we should do our own work, and then we should ask the Americans if we need help to help us solve our problems" (8). This political position of Qatar represents a departure from the old tradition of many leaders and states in the region. The region is accustomed to countries and leaders that depend solely on the US to bear responsibility and to intervene and solve conflicts. Qatar, however, has indicated it's willing to take the lead and do its share regionally and globally.

The United States needs Qatar's help in shaping the political outcome that continues to evolve from the volatility of the Arab spring. Qatar can play a constructive role and can form a strategic partnership with US and other regional actors to shape events and usher in an era of normalcy and stability and prevent the total collapse of many states due to its credibility with many decision makers regionally and globally. In addition, to its soft power, Qatar has demonstrated its willingness to use hard power and stand to protect civilian lives under duress. For instance, Qatar helped implement the Arab league's decision to protect Libyan civilians during the brutal onslaught carried against them by the late Muammar Qaddafi. In addition, Qatar vehemently objected to the way the Syrian regime responded to its own civilians, even with the knowledge that it may endanger its relationship with Iran, a country that shares with it vast amounts of natural gas reserves. Therefore, Qatar presents itself as a maverick and as a reliable and a stable actor in a region washed by many troubling realities.

The US and Qatar can form a new partnership based on reciprocity, respect, mutual accommodations, and mutual benefits to arrive at the desired outcome that both seek: equality, justice, and stability for all. Alas, some in the US would like to deconstruct the American Qatari relationship to fighting terrorism. Others would be as happy to view it through the narrow prism of energy and cash supplies. Neither approach reflects a deep understanding of the important role Qatar plays in the region, nor do these approaches

reveal the reality of the challenges that the region is facing and the importance of having a stable, pragmatic, visionary, and trusted actor like Qatar at this stage to share its expertise in conflict resolution and to assist in peace-making and peace building.

The Obama administration has to distance itself from those who accuse the state of Qatar of supporting extremism, violence, and terrorism. For instance, David Cohn, a deputy chief of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), said "Iran is not the only state that provides financial support for terrorist organizations (9)." Qatar has been supporting Hamas, and other extremists groups operating in Syria (10)." The Obama administration has to put an end to such reckless accusations so Qatar can continue its role as an unconventional regional player. Qatar should be commended and encouraged to keep open channels with all the key players in the region. Demanding that it severs its relations with any party or organization is short-sighted and threatens its nature and constrains its leeway and its contribution to world peace and dialogue.

### **Qatar as a strategic partner**

Qatar is not only able but also ready to assume a regional role of peace-making and a stabilizer in many cases to avoid the catastrophic collapse of many states in the region. But for Qatar to do so, it needs the US to reconsider its course of action and to adopt a new approach that treats each and every case separate and genuinely considers coupling social and economic massers as part and parcel of a long term policy dealing with conflict zones in the Middle East. The inability of the US to demonstrate enough flexibility in the formation of its foreign policy compelled many in the region to look for different allies and seek unorthodox ways to support their desired outcome away from the US and its obscure vision regarding a true transition to democracy in the Middle East. The indecisiveness of the US in the region paved the way for the Russian Federation to fill a perceived power vacuum in a region that does not tolerate or forgive mistakes. Both Qatar and the US would not benefit from any Russian expansion in the region. The US sees that as a continuation of the Cold War, while Qatar views any Russian role in the region as perpetuation of the old order and as a tool to increase tension between and among neighbours.

Regardless of the Qatar and the US' displeasure, the Russians jumped on the opportunity and began exercising and manipulating events in the region in a way that demonstrated a desire to reverse the revolutions and lump the region in chaos. The Russians objected to all the revolutions that took place in the region and worked hand in hand with the old regime to abort all of them. The Russians did not hide their excitement at the military coup that forced the first democratically elected civilian in the modern history of Egypt from power, Mohamad Morsi, nor did they conceal their unhindered

military and economic support for the regime in Syria. The Egyptian and Syrian cases demonstrate unequivocally Russia's desire to prevent any peaceful transition to democracy in the region. American passivity towards the Arab Spring cannot be justified or explained given America's strong tradition of supporting democracies, liberalism, and protecting human rights. However, Russian behaviour can be explained both domestically and regionally.

Domestically, the Russians resisted the outcome of the revolutions to eliminate any internal threats from the indigenous Islamic minorities that live inside Russia. These minorities have been seeking independence since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The Russian Federation has responded by excessive force against the majority of the Muslim civilians that live in the Caucasus (11). Therefore, Russia considers any transition to democracy in the region as unwelcome and must be reversed to avoid any attempt by indigenous Muslims to rebel and ask for more rights. Therefore, Russia invested heavily in spoiling any smooth transition in Egypt, Libya, or Syria and worked endlessly to define and stain all the transition movements as terrorist, Jihadist, or extremists. Russian behaviour complicated events on the ground for the Americans and their allies in the region. Russia has prolonged the conflict in Syria by acting as a dishonest broker between the regime and the opposition. Many in the Syrian opposition accuse the Russian mediator as being more hawkish than the Syrian regime itself (12).

Regionally, the Russians have been motivated by balancing Iran and Syria at the expense of Turkey, empowering the Shias at the expense of the Sunnis, limiting and eclipsing any role of the US and other Western European nations from influencing any outcome at the cost of Russia. Russia's desire in all of that is to keep the tension very high in the Middle East, so oil prices remain high and demand for weapons continues, to become a military and an economic hegemon in the region. It is imperative for the US and other regional powers in the Middle East to stop Russia from continuing down that very dangerous path of dividing the region along ethnic and ideological lines. The use of oil as a "soft power" in the last few months is a critical first step to curtail Russia's ambitions in the region and around the globe. Pushing the price of oil down will hurt Russia in the long run and will force it to reconsider its political behaviour and its expansionist policies. Constraining Russia's financial resources will lead to limiting its involvement regionally and globally and holding it accountable for its actions will discourage it from hampering and harming the global balance of power.

The United States is in real need for stable, experienced, strong, able and willing partners in the region to cooperate with and facilitate any dialogue that will limit if not eliminate conflicts and chaos in the Middle East. Qatar is extending its hand to the US



and all peace loving countries to play a constructive and a transformative role to bring the region back from the brink of collapse (13).

## Conclusion

The Obama Administration irked the region on so many levels with the way it has handled the Arab Spring, especially in terms of Syria and Egypt over the last four years. Many observers in the region have been baffled by the lack of American leadership on Egypt, Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen. Therefore, the US has to cooperate with stable, willing, and reliable allies like Qatar in the area to prevent the collapse of many states and to thwart any attempt by Russia to expand or bring the region back to the rigid era of the Cold War. Both Qatar and the US find a way to work together, or Russia will expand in the region. Therefore, the US is at a critical juncture in the Middle East. Its credibility is very low, its policies are indecisive, its strength is being questioned, and its moral compass has lost direction. Many people and leaders are doubtful of its commitment to its own values of democracy, liberty, human rights, and equality for all. Unless the US regains the initiative by convincing its allies of its willingness to protect its values, other powers are ready to fill the vacuum and replace the US as the key power brokers in the region. Few responsible states are able to help the US spread peace, stability, justice, hope, and equality for all. Qatar is willing to be one of them.

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